



Psychological Impact of Violence: A Trauma-Based Analysis of Gender and Power in Sudha Murty's Fiction

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Abstract

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This study critically examines the psychological impact of violence in Sudha Murty's novels, Dollar Bahu and The Mother I Never Knew, through the lens of Judith Herman's trauma theory. By focusing on how violence manifests and perpetuates trauma within Murty's characters, this analysis explores the intersections of gender, power, and cultural context, revealing the intricate ways these elements shape individual and collective identities. Murty's works depict trauma not only as a response to physical violence but also as a consequence of emotional neglect, cultural alienation, and familial betrayal. This paper highlights the journey of Murty's characters toward resilience and empowerment in the face of oppressive social structures. Interdisciplinary insights from psychology, sociology, and literary theory help to unpack how violence within Murty's narratives reinforces patriarchal dynamics, thereby influencing the characters' sense of self-worth and place within their communities. By portraying the psychological consequences of violence, Murty's novels underscore the resilience of women and marginalized individuals as they confront and resist entrenched social norms. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on trauma, gender, and literature, demonstrating the value of literary analysis in shedding light on the often-overlooked emotional and psychological costs of violence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Trauma, a profound and lasting impact of experiencing or witnessing harm, has been a pervasive theme in literary works across cultures and centuries. Trauma Theory, developed by Judith Herman, offers profound insights into understanding and addressing traumatic experiences, making it highly relevant

to everyday life. At its core, Trauma theory recognizes the profound and lasting impact of experiencing or witnessing harm, which can manifest in various ways, including emotional numbing, anxiety, and depression. This framework is essential in today's world, where individuals face numerous challenges, from personal struggles to global crises. The dialectic

of trauma, which oscillates between numbing and intrusion, is particularly pertinent in modern life. Many people struggle with emotional regulation, alternating between feeling overwhelmed and disconnected. Trauma theory provides a valuable lens through which to understand these experiences, encouraging empathy, validation, and support. By acknowledging trauma's impact, individuals can begin to process emotions, rebuild connections, and foster resilience.

In daily life, Trauma theory informs various aspects, including mental health, education, social work, and healthcare. It highlights the importance of self-care, community building, and emotional support. Recognizing trauma's presence in personal relationships, workplaces, and communities enables us to create safer, more supportive environments. Moreover, Trauma theory sheds light on contemporary issues like COVID-19 trauma, racial trauma, gender-based violence, refugee trauma, and climate trauma. The implications of Trauma theory for individuals are profound. By developing self-awareness, recognizing personal trauma experiences, and establishing healthy boundaries, individuals can take the first steps toward healing. Emotional regulation, support seeking, and resilience building are essential coping strategies.

On a societal level, Trauma Theory underscores the need for policy reforms, community engagement, education, and resource allocation to address systemic trauma. Ultimately, integrating Trauma theory into daily life cultivates empathy, understanding, and compassion. By acknowledging trauma's presence and promoting supportive environments, we can foster resilience, encourage open discussion, and break the silence surrounding traumatic experiences. As we navigate the complexities of modern life, Trauma Theory offers a valuable framework for creating a more supportive, inclusive, and healing society.

Trauma in India is deeply intertwined with the country's cultural, social, and historical fabric. Historical events like colonialism, the Partition of India, and the Emergency period have left lasting scars. The caste system, patriarchal

norms, communal violence, and economic exploitation perpetuate cultural and social trauma. Societal expectations and pressures, such as family obligations, marriage, and education, can exacerbate trauma. Mental health stigma and limited resources compound the issue. Indian trauma theory emphasizes contextualizing trauma within Indian culture and history, understanding collective trauma, integrating traditional healing practices, and addressing power dynamics.

Eminent researchers like Ashis Nandy, Sudhir Kakar, and Gopal Guru have contributed to the field. The major works like *The Intimate Enemy* and *The Indians* provides valuable insights about the concept of trauma. Organizations like the Indian Association of Clinical Psychologists, NIMHANS, and The Banyan work towards addressing trauma. Despite challenges, efforts are underway to increase awareness, develop culturally sensitive interventions, and address systemic inequalities. The key challenges include reducing stigma, integrating traditional and modern approaches, and addressing social determinants. Future directions involve promoting culturally sensitive trauma-informed care, supporting community-based initiatives, and advocating for policy changes.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) explores the trauma caused by the Partition of India, delving into the emotional toll on families torn apart by political upheaval. Similarly, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) addresses the trauma of Partition, colonialism, and India's post-independence struggles, weaving a narrative that blends history, myth, and personal experience. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) is set during the Emergency, shedding light on the trauma caused by political repression, social change, and economic hardship. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) examines the trauma caused by family secrets, social expectations, and caste violence in Kerala.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) explores the trauma caused by colonialism, identity crisis, and social displacement in the Himalayas. These novels collectively provide a powerful portrayal of trauma's impact on individuals, families, and communities in 20th-

century India. Through their narratives, these authors illuminate the complex interplay between historical events, social norms, and personal experiences, offering nuanced insights into the trauma that has shaped India's modern identity.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers have consistently shown that violence against women is a pervasive theme in Indian literature, reflecting the societal norms and cultural expectations that perpetuate such violence. Feminist literary theory provides a crucial framework for analyzing violence and gender, highlighting the ways in which patriarchal societies perpetuate violence against women. Trauma theory illuminates the long-term psychological consequences of violence, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. Studies have also highlighted the importance of psychological resilience and coping mechanisms in mitigating the effects of violence. Sudha Murty's novels offer nuanced portrayals of violence, gender, and power dynamics, providing insight into the lived experiences of women and marginalized communities. Murty's works also demonstrate the ways in which violence is perpetuated and resisted in Indian society, highlighting the complex interplay between cultural norms and individual agency. Social Learning Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how violence is learned and perpetuated through observation and reinforcement. Power and Control Theory highlights the ways in which patriarchal societies perpetuate violence against women, maintaining power and control through coercion and manipulation.

Despite the growing body of research on violence and gender, there remains a need for more nuanced understanding of the intersectional dynamics of violence and gender. Existing research has also been criticized for neglecting the psychological consequences of violence on individuals and communities. In conclusion, this literature review highlights the significance of examining violence, gender, and psychology in Sudha Murty's novels, addressing gaps and limitations in existing research to

contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological consequences of violence.

The research aims to contribute a deeper understanding of trauma representation in Indian literature by analyzing the ways in which trauma is embedded in the narrative structures, character development, and thematic concerns of the novels. Furthermore, this study seeks to illuminate the cultural and social contexts that perpetuate trauma, emphasizing the need for empathy, understanding, and support in facilitating recovery. This paper will examine how Murty's novels represent trauma experiences, and the insights it offers into the complexities of trauma recovery. It also sheds light on how cultural and social norms shape trauma experiences in the Indian context. Through this analysis, this paper will demonstrate the value of applying Trauma Theory to literary works, enhancing our understanding of trauma representation and recovery. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to a growing body of scholarship on trauma studies, highlighting the significance of literary works in illuminating the complexities of human experience.

Sudha Murty's novels, *The Mother I Never Knew* and *Dollar Bahu*, offer poignant explorations of trauma's complex dynamics, shedding light on the intricate web of emotional, psychological, and social consequences that accompany traumatic experiences. This paper applies Judith Herman's Trauma Theory (1992) to critically examine the representation of trauma in these novels, highlighting the intersectionality of cultural, social, and psychological factors that shape trauma experiences. Sudha Murty has explored themes of trauma, resilience, and recovery in several of her works. These two novels taken for study provide a poignant portrayal of trauma experiences, shedding light on the complex dynamics of intergenerational trauma, emotional neglect, and cultural trauma. By drawing from personal experiences and grounding trauma narratives in everyday life, Murty creates empathetic connections between readers and characters.

Herman's Trauma Theory

This theory, developed by Judith Herman in her seminal work *Trauma and Recovery*, explores the psychological impact of trauma on an individual's identity, emotional state, and relationships. It also delves into the ways individuals attempt to reclaim their lives in the aftermath of trauma. Judith Herman's trauma theory is centered on the psychological damage that trauma can inflict on individuals and how recovery is deeply tied to reconstructing one's sense of self and rebuilding trust in relationships. Herman divides the recovery process into three stages: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life.

According to her theory, trauma not only leaves individuals feeling helpless and violated but also disrupts their basic trust in others and fragments their identity. Healing, therefore, is a painstaking process that requires confronting the trauma, understanding its effects, and gradually reintegrating into a supportive community. Trauma theory, as posited by Judith Herman, provides a valuable framework for understanding Murty's works. Herman's concept of intergenerational trauma resonates with Murty's portrayal of family dynamics in *The Mother I Never Knew*. Similarly, Murty's exploration of cultural trauma in *Dollar Bahu* aligns with Herman's emphasis on the importance of acknowledging trauma, processing emotions, and rebuilding connections.

Murty's narrative techniques, including autobiographical elements and realistic storytelling, authenticate trauma narratives and create empathetic connections. Her emphasis on emotional support, self-awareness, and empowerment resonates with trauma theory's focus on resilience and recovery. By applying trauma theory to Murty's works, we gain a deeper understanding of trauma representation in Indian literature, cultural and societal factors influencing trauma experiences, and resilience and recovery strategies in trauma narratives.

Trauma Theory, as posited by Herman, emphasizes the significance of acknowledging trauma, processing emotions, and rebuilding connections for recovery. This framework

provides a nuanced understanding of the dialectic of trauma, characterized by oscillation between numbing and intrusion. Through a close reading of Murty's novels, this paper will explore how trauma is represented, experienced, and negotiated by the protagonists, Venkatesh and Vinuta. Herman's trauma theory provides a powerful lens through which we can analyze Sudha Murty's novel *The Mother I Never Knew*. In this novel, Sudha Murty portrays the intertwined stories of two protagonists, Venkatesh and Mukesh, who each discover shocking truths about their families. Through these character's journeys, the novel vividly explores the long-lasting effects of trauma on personal identity, familial bonds, and the complex process of seeking healing and acceptance.

Trauma and Identity in *Dollar Bahu* and *The Mother I never Knew*

Sudha Murty's novel *Dollar Bahu* tells a story about the complex dynamics within an Indian family, exploring themes of materialism, cultural identity, and family loyalty. While the novel does not directly depict trauma in the way that Herman's trauma theory typically addresses, it does highlight emotional upheaval, identity crises, and the longing for acceptance—all of which can produce traumatic effects, especially when unresolved over time. In *Dollar Bahu*, Murty presents a story of Gouramma, a traditional mother, and her children who are pulled between the comforts of Indian values and the allure of Western prosperity. Through the novel's portrayal of family members affected by financial strain, social comparison, and changing cultural values, *Dollar Bahu* can be examined through the lens of Judith Herman's trauma theory, which provides a framework for understanding the trauma of disconnection and the healing process that comes from rediscovering a sense of belonging and purpose.

Dollar Bahu focuses on a family whose relationships are strained by the influence of wealth and cultural disparity. Gouramma, the matriarch, idolizes her son Chandru, who lives in the United States and sends back remittances to his family. She perceives her daughter-in-law, Vinuta, who lives in India, as lesser because Vinuta lacks the material wealth

that Chandru's wife, Jamuna, possesses. This preference for her son's wealthy American lifestyle over her traditional Indian values creates a sense of alienation and inferiority within Vinuta, who becomes a victim of constant comparisons and criticisms.

Vinuta's journey in the novel can be seen as a process of grappling with the traumatic effects of emotional neglect and diminished self-worth. Herman's theory emphasizes how trauma can disrupt one's self-perception, and in Vinuta's case, Gouramma's constant comparisons slowly erode her self-esteem and sense of identity. Feeling rejected, Vinuta gradually internalizes the idea that she is inferior; creating an emotional burden that disrupts her peace and sense of belonging within the family. Gouramma's actions highlight how unmet expectations and unspoken emotional abuse can lead to a sense of emotional and psychological trauma for individuals who feel they have no place or worth within their primary support systems.

Vinuta, the protagonist, is subjected to a dehumanizing and invasive medical procedure to verify her fertility, orchestrated by her husband Girish and his family. This traumatic event culminates in Vinuta's emotional breakdown, illustrating the crippling impact of prolonged emotional abuse, cultural trauma, and identity erosion. The incident starkly highlights the destructive dynamics of patriarchal norms, societal expectations, and power imbalances that perpetuate trauma. Vinuta's experiences resonate with Judith Herman's Trauma Theory (1992), underscoring the importance of acknowledging trauma, processing emotions, and rebuilding connections. As Vinuta navigates her journey toward healing and self-discovery, Murty masterfully illustrates the resilience of the human spirit, emphasizing the crucial role of support, self-awareness, and empowerment in overcoming trauma. Through Vinuta's story, Murty sheds light on the insidious nature of trauma, encouraging empathy, understanding, and social change.

In the novel *The Mother I Never Knew*, both Venkatesh and Mukesh experience profound trauma upon learning unexpected truths about

their family origins. Venkatesh, a middle-class bank manager, discovers that his father had a secret second family. This revelation shakes his understanding of his father's identity, his own heritage, and his place within the family. Similarly, Mukesh, a successful businessman, uncovers that he was adopted and that his biological mother is still alive. The sudden realization that his entire life has been built on a foundation of secrets forces him to question his sense of self.

According to Herman's trauma theory, traumatic events can destabilize an individual's identity. Both Venkatesh and Mukesh face a sudden loss of their familial identity and the role they believed they played within their families. Herman explains that trauma creates "disorder" in the individual's perception of self, which is reflected in the protagonists' sense of confusion and betrayal. For Venkatesh, the father he once revered is suddenly a stranger. For Mukesh, the loving parents who raised him are revealed to be concealers of a deep secret. This sense of betrayal is central to Herman's theory, as trauma often forces individuals to confront uncomfortable truths about the people they trusted most.

The Stages of Healing in the Novels

Herman's stages of recovery- safety, remembrance, mourning, and reconnection can also be applied to the experiences of the main characters in *Dollar Bahu*, particularly Vinuta and Gouramma as each character navigates their own emotional journey, they go through stages that parallel Herman's framework.

The first step in trauma recovery involves creating a sense of safety. In *Dollar Bahu*, Vinuta does not initially find this safety within her in-laws' home, as she feels perpetually overshadowed by Jamuna's wealth. This lack of emotional security manifests as anxiety and internalized inferiority. It is only later, when Vinuta begins to find inner strength and self-worth outside of her mother-in-law's judgments that she begins to establish a sense of personal safety. For Saroja, the safety comes from recognizing the harm her biases have caused within her family. She travels to the United States and observes the superficiality and isolation that her son's materialistic lifestyle

brings, allowing her to recognize the value of simpler, more genuine relationships.

In the novel *The Mother I never knew* for both protagonists, the realization of their respective traumas initially disrupts their inner peace and stability. They are thrust into a world of emotional turmoil where they can no longer rely on the familiar relationships and support systems they once took for granted. Both Venkatesh and Mukesh embark on physical journeys to discover more about their biological families, symbolizing their search for a new sense of safety and stability. They seek answers, hoping to piece together the fragmented parts of their identities in order to rebuild a foundation of understanding.

In Herman's second stage of recovery, individuals confront the trauma, processing their pain and grieving their losses. For Vinuta, this stage comes when she acknowledges how deeply hurt she has been by Gouramma's favoritism and begins to understand that her self-worth is not dependent on external validation. By allowing herself to feel this pain, Vinuta can start to let go of the resentment and self-doubt that have burdened her. Similarly, Gouramma's journey to America forces her to confront her own misconceptions. She mourns the lost opportunities to connect with Vinuta, realizing that she has been unfairly critical. This emotional reckoning allows Gouramma to recognize her own shortcomings and empathize with the impact her behavior has had on her family.

For Venkatesh, this involves coming to terms with the betrayal he feels towards his father and accepting the existence of a half-brother he never knew about. He wrestles with feelings of resentment, confusion, and, ultimately, acceptance. Mukesh, on the other hand, mourns the loss of the identity he thought was his own. He confronts his adoptive parents, grappling with feelings of abandonment and loss that accompany the realization of his true heritage. This stage is essential for both characters, as they learn to let go of their idealized pasts and embrace the painful realities of their histories. By doing so, they can move forward, no longer shackled to the illusions they once held.

The final stage of recovery is about reconnecting with a sense of purpose and forging new, healthier relationships. For Vinuta, this reconnection comes through a newfound sense of self-acceptance, allowing her to rebuild her life with a clearer understanding of her own worth and priorities. She gains confidence in herself and develops an independent identity that is not solely defined by her role within her husband's family. Gouramma, on the other hand, returns to India with a transformed outlook. She begins to appreciate Vinuta for her inherent qualities, realizing that genuine happiness and peace come from relationships rather than wealth. By realigning her values, Gouramma also starts to rebuild her relationships with Vinuta and the rest of her family, creating a foundation for healthier connections based on mutual respect and understanding.

For Venkatesh, this means building a connection with his half-brother and fostering a sense of kinship that transcends his initial feelings of betrayal. Mukesh, meanwhile, reconciles with his adoptive parents while also forming a bond with his biological mother. By doing so, he bridges the gap between his old and new identities, thereby rediscovering a sense of wholeness. Through these connections, both characters embody Herman's notion of reclaiming one's place in the world after trauma. They accept their new realities and rebuild their lives with a renewed sense of self and purpose.

Through the lens of Herman's trauma theory, *The Mother I Never Knew and Dollar Bahu* we can see how the novel delves into the subtler forms of trauma that arise from emotional neglect, cultural expectations, and familial discord. It also highlights the lasting effects of trauma on individual identity and the journey towards healing. Both Vinuta and Gouramma experience a journey of emotional recovery, moving through Herman's stages of safety, mourning, and reconnection and both Venkatesh and Mukesh experience a shattering of their foundational identities, grappling with the resulting trauma and its implications for their self-perception and relationships. By navigating the stages of recovery outlined by Herman, they ultimately find a way to integrate

their pasts into a cohesive, resilient sense of self and underscores the possibility of healing and transformation when individuals are willing to confront their pain, mourn their losses, and rebuild connections on a foundation of respect, empathy, and authenticity. Sudha Murty's novel underscores the importance of acceptance, resilience, and connection in the aftermath of trauma, and it beautifully illustrates how individuals can transform their pain into a newfound understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Murty's works critique societal norms and expectations that perpetuate trauma, highlighting the lasting impact of unresolved trauma on individuals and families. Her stories empower trauma survivors, promoting resilience and hope. Through her writing, Murty raises awareness about trauma, encouraging open discussions and dispelling stigma. By humanizing trauma survivors, Murty's narratives offer a powerful tool for trauma awareness and education. Overall, Sudha Murty's writing serves as a powerful tool for promoting social change and advocacy. Her works provide a nuanced understanding of trauma experiences, encouraging empathy, understanding, and support. As trauma theory continues to evolve, Murty's novels offer essential perspectives on trauma representation, recovery, and resilience.

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